

Jewels of Imagination

by Adair Broughton

Every shimmer of the lake reflected in her eyes like jewels of imagination. The water glistened with blue sky, assured in its existence, sharing its knowledge with wrinkles of wisdom from patterns of breeze. Every so often that same nature's whisper blew her hair in front of her eyes, which she delicately brushed back with one hand. In her other hand a book.

It was October and the sky was azure, like someone had painted the sky the colour of perfection, a postcard of summer on a day of autumn. It was cool but not cold, the sun still able to warm as long as the occasional wispy and white cartoon clouds did not stroll past the orange friend hanging with aplomb in the sky.

There was depth to her gaze behind the calmness and serenity that watching the lake provided. She had been here many times before, making the same trip of peace, to find something hidden within that she had never been free of, a certain memory.

It was also a break from the city, whose skyline in the distance almost floating on the deep blue, was layered like a toy model, so fragile and tiny. The truth was very different. The city was a noisy, aggressive and busy place. Perspective did that. Once you step away from something, (or someone she thought), then you do not really know them in the same way. In that way a city was like a person. The outside and inside juxtaposed with conflicting presumption. Distance showed simplicity, but once inside, complication. How could you ever know anyone's mind unless you were close? And even then how could you ever truly know what someone else was thinking.

Thousands of people she could not see were busying themselves with life and its routine, with worry's and laughter and concerns. Yet she could see none of these at the moment, just the shield of concrete acting as a wall of shadow surrounding and protecting whoever was within. She held out her thumb and the whole city could nearly disappear. She imagined an astronaut doing the same with the earth. That felt powerful as well as limiting.

It made her think of him. A ghost caught in the cage of 'what if'. She was a stranger to the city right now, as much as that person was a stranger to her.

In that city she was as integrated in daily life as much as anyone else. Her career kept her with enough money for a nice condo and business suits but this escape was a like a protective wall. Was it because she never wanted to let go? Was the man an excuse so that she could always have that feeling of not belonging? She had tried to forget him, had been sincere in that approach but it was like he was the tower protecting her from ever being herself. She gave him too much credit she thought. This was something else, something she had not yet been able to understand.

She could see the tall tower, like a father looking over his tiny children. Some days it danced behind haze but today it was solid and erect. Renowned as the symbol of where she lived, it was a statement of intent that was really a beacon of possibility. But right now she was without the noise. Maybe the concrete boundary acted to contain the majority of noise inside. It could have been a world away. Looking down at the book she stared and a small smile danced on her lips. It was a smile of confusion, about strange things that happen, like fates own angel appearing for her. It was a smile of incredulity.

Her gaze met the lake once more, then the city, as if she could look through the harbour front to a tiny backstreet bookstore she had been inside only a few hours before. Her face became serious again.

When she had left the shop it was only then that she realised something was different. It was like she had been drugged and things were still vague even though her mind was now clear and lucid. There was a fog over what had happened as if it had happened in a rush. But in that shop everything had happened slowly, as if she would have been able to see beneath the seconds ticking on an old watch and into the physical mechanism of time itself. Her thoughts swayed with the smoothness of a pendulum beneath a grandfather clock.

Even with that clarity of feeling the bookshop owner had been a shadow inside the shop. That was still the image in her mind, as if he wasn't quite real or substantial enough to have actually been there. He could have been made from mist. What could she compare it too except a black hole sun, a feeling of radiated warmth from an invisible source? She could actually taste, rather than sense, a faint glow of light as easily as she could smell the mustiness that only time and leather bound books could produce. There had been no discerning features to him, nothing remarkable to grab hold of to make him more than that ghost of the ethereal. Yet there had been warmth, like she had felt as a small child with a protective hug embracing her against the unknowns of life. She had not been nervous at the time; it had all seemed normal even if the outcome could be looked on as peculiar. Her mind had stamped that silhouette as her memory and no matter how deeply she jostled that recent history, the shadow remained. He wasn't an old man, nor was he young but that was all she knew.

The water occasionally made a gentle lapping noise as if the lake wanted to breathe, to show it was alive. She had always looked back at the time she had been standing in the same place all those years ago. There were more buildings on the skyline but no significant changes. The lake had retained its calm for all those years. He was the main difference. He had been out of her life at every other visit and that was always what her thoughts turned too when she was here. Often she had sat until the shadows were long, dieing of hunger from the sun's empty plate. He was a secret, something only her thoughts had access too. Nobody else knew about these days and so he became a safe place that she could take herself too when other relationships failed or she wanted to feel guilt about giving away so much. Guilt often meant she was still alive.

But now she held this book, she had finally realised it was a desire for that feeling, of needing never to forget, why she had really always visited. He was a part of her, even if that was just the spirit of an idea, a pattern ingrained on the mind, both a soothing recollection and a painful regret. The book was finally a piece of substance. Maybe she could reach him by osmosis, breathing life and soul from pictures and word. Was there another way?

She had refused to search his history waiting patiently for him to return, to acknowledge that it was him who had left. She hated the real reasons but knew the truth of them, knew her part in that. Then she hated the stubbornness with what had been thrown away. It had seemed too easy, like a pebble thrown into the lake with ripples all too quickly disappearing into the mercury like deep. It felt like the lake could swallow everything, even her, so she took a step back, one step further from the bookshop also.

Was that significant, the one place she had been drawn too she was now backing away from?

What had surprised her most was the length of time it took her to realise what she felt. Only then could she understand his decision. It had been years after that this had stunned her into a certain submission of guilt but even then she could not hold herself back, not change what had happened, could not stop times endless ticking. She couldn't change what she had done. So she placed him in a safe place, a location of a photo they had taken together, somewhere where she could go and still feel. Was that all? Was it only about 'feeling' or a certain type of 'feeling'?

It was a place where she had not hurt him. She wanted to keep hold of that.

Today was different. Thoughts of 'what if' could undergo metamorphosis into an actual reality if what the bookshop owner had said was true. It was not a feeling as pretty as butterfly wings, a feeling to seduce or even calming. It was warmth; radiating in the same way he had once made her feel. He had called her beautiful. Lots of people had, but it always felt like he had meant something else, not just how handsome and delicate she was.

Trepidation held a sickness and she had not even begun to really think about the implications yet. She was hardly past the stage of disbelief. She leaned towards its validity while thinking it preposterous; that dichotomy made her want a cigarette, made her want to shout, to cry, to run away. But in essence running away was what she had been doing for all those years. Did she really want to run into a void, a shadow land of hurt all over again?

Even that wasn't fair to the people she had met since. For a long time he was just a little piece of history but instead of healing time seemed to create a bridge she wanted to cross to meet him again. There had been many options available. Could she have flown to see him? Was playing a waiting game fair? She had met nice people, had felt that he wasn't needed. She had met people even while they still had a relationship. Maybe she had

ruined it before it had even started. She had not realised how much he had cared. Maybe that was why he had denied her existence, had refused to contact or find out anything about her even after months.

That was why this book was important. If nothing else it would tell her what she should have done, what the answer was. The current reality had obviously not worked. Was intrigue enough to outweigh hurt? To know of a possible other existence might be dangerous, scary, upsetting. The man had not said it was good or bad even if he had given the book and hinted about what it contained. The act of provision was surely to show her something.

Or was this a further test that she was creating herself. Was her imagination now convincing her that she had really been in that bookshop? Some people cut themselves to feel, drank to forget, and abused themselves to maintain self-loathing. Was she trying to haunt herself into disappointment because she was finally being free of him and this was her mind recreating his validity? He was a lot of memory to be free of.

The man in the bookshop had been cryptic but nothing reminded her of a vague charlatan pouncing on commonalities between people. He had significant facts, intricacies of her own thoughts that only she had as reference points to the relationship while it had lasted. She couldn't question the truth of what he knew but could question about how he came about it. Did everyone have a history like this that he could mine information from; find the lost needs and feed of the emotion of recall. Maybe what she had was not special at all. What she had was something everyone felt. Her own issue was that she could never completely escape from it

The book was the complete story, that journey in time that she could never have. It was the antidote to that regret, a medicine to years of thought. It was not believable, could not possibly contain a different history or reality unless made up. She had heard rumours of science fiction proposals of many universes, of every possibility existing as some reality but she had access to only one, everyone did. She knew this, knew with every beat of her heart but when you wanted something so badly you held and grabbed that possibility as strong as you could without wanting the truth to haunt you with depressed frustration. Besides, at the very least it was intriguing, like the thoughts of fairies or ghosts or a freedom of thought that only dies with age. If you are a child then nothing is impossible. Knowledge of limitation is one of the shadows cast by innocence.

In many ways she was happy. Life goes on after all and it was a long time ago. Time was meant to heal but it was not really a wound. Too much time had past for anything to ever happen. Her thoughts had always been about what she could have done differently. But life back then had not been black and white. Had she really known what she wanted? Was he right to expect that. Nobody can match ideals. The question had never been answered and each year floated past as silently as one of the yellow leaves falling from the trees.

What had intrigued her was how much the ethereal stranger knew, how much the man could access her mood and feeling and desires for that day. But it was not like a heavenly

apparition; even with the 'light' there was a heavy aura too, like an invisible weight that held him down as much as her thoughts chained her to an unclaimed past. He could not have known of her trek or where she was heading and why. But he had drowned her with detail that began to submerge itself even into her deepest memories. He knew of conversations that had stopped the world rotating, of wishes that had given meaning even to the mundane. What didn't have body had a real power over her. He would be a stranger now, just another memory lost to the past. These ghosts of imagination could always come back to haunt and she had always been careful not to care too much. What was imagination except fantasy, a false reality, something she could only grasp in the ghost of thought. She longed for the substantial, what she could hold, real feelings of a history and a present that did not float on the breeze like the lone bird using hidden thermals or wind to pass silently by. She wanted touch.

She had thoughts that were the ripples emanating from the unknown, always widening but seemingly weakening as they did so. She wanted a splash, to drown, to be immersed in something new. Time refused to let her swim.

The book felt like a dead weight to her. To open it was neither promise nor hope. To open it was to have every thought of what might have been come back like a phantom from her dreams, like breaking a seal on a treasure you didn't own. If the book were a diary of how her life would have been with him it would still be limiting. It wouldn't be her life; she would be reading another's experience. Her decision had been made long ago. There was nothing to be done to change that. This reality was hard enough. She could create her own history each time she came to look at the lake. His memory was strong and in some ways that was something she could keep through life. She hoped he had done the same. She would read his story, see his pictures, but not her own.

The heart was symbolism as well as a function. She was strong because of his weakness in never being able to speak. The communication had failed. He had once said she was his ocean and that she should drown him tonight. In a way she could. It would be easy.

She threw the book into the water. He had let her float away and she was doing the same. She waited until the book had sunk, its own history now blurred and deep. Maybe she would visit a bookshop on the way home. Imagination was a treasure after all. They had both shared that.

The woman took a camera out of her pocket. Maybe this was the last time she would visit the lake. She wanted a memory this time. It was a beautiful day.

Not far away, beneath a tower in the city a shadow could be seen changing a sign on a door from open to closed.